

RHODA'S SECRET

Continued From Last Issue

"She has no idea of it; nobody knows but you. I tell you, because—"

She stopped and looked at him; her haggard dark eyes were soft and tender. "Do you know why I tell you, Adrian?"

"No, I do not!" he replied, looking steadily at the book before him.

"I would not tell you before I saw that you had made up your mind. You have made up your mind, haven't you?"

"Yes!" he answered firmly.

"I wanted you to know that Rhoda will bring you a great fortune, if you can win her, Adrian. Do not be too sure of that."

"I am not sure at all."

"But I think you can make her love you. When will you tell Mrs. Dering, Adrian?"

"At once," he said. "I mean to come down to Dering with you tonight."

A look of malicious pleasure came into Miss Dering's eyes.

"Yes, tell her at once. It is only fair that she should know that you mean to try to win Rhoda for your wife. But do not tell about my will."

CHAPTER V.

"Rhoda, tell your little Molly."

Rhoda started from the deep sad reverie into which she had fallen and looked down at the pretty figure at her feet.

"Tell her what?" she said, with a pretty smile.

"You are looking so sad. Tell me what you are thinking about."

The two girls were sitting in Molly's room about a month after Rhoda's return from London. The window was open, and the first warm breath of Spring blew in from the gardens. Molly put her arms coaxingly round Rhoda.

"You are going to be good to Adrian, aren't you, Rhoda?"

Rhoda flushed deeply.

"Molly, you are silly."

"No, I am very wise. I used to laugh at Adrian and his solemn ways, but I have got to like him lately, since he fell in love with you."

"Molly, you should not talk so."

"Why not? We all know—you know it better than anybody else. Poor Adrian, how you chilled him yesterday by that solemn gaze of yours; I could not treat Jack like it."

"When does Jack come home?" Rhoda said, hastily changing the subject.

"Next Tuesday," answered Molly. "Bill has grown out of knowledge, hasn't he, Rhoda? Come back here, sir."

The black puppy, who had been lying on the hearth rug, got slowly up and ambled across to Molly.

"Your master is coming home in five days," said Molly, shaking her forefinger at the dog. "Hold yourself up straight, sir, and do credit to my teaching."

Molly was interrupted at this moment by the entrance of Mrs. Dering. Mrs. Dering looked very pale and worn, and there was a cold bitterness in her tone as she addressed Rhoda.

"Your aunt wants you, Rhoda."

Rhoda rose and left the room in silence. Molly, who did not move from the footstool where she had been sitting at Rhoda's feet, went on lecturing her dog.

"Give me your right paw—your right paw. Don't you know your right from your left? Isn't he an ignorant puppy, mother?"

Mrs. Dering had sat down upon a low chair by the fire and was looking gravely at Molly.

"I wish you would leave off these childish ways, Molly."

Molly shook her head.

"I shall never leave off being fond of Bill, mother."

"I wish Rhoda had never come to Dering," Mrs. Dering said, after a moment's pause.

There was a bitterness in the tone that startled Molly. She got up and crossed over to her mother's side.

"Mother, it could never have been. I should never have married Adrian. Don't think that Rhoda has crossed your will in this. I could never have married Adrian."

"She has supplanted you with your aunt," Mrs. Dering went on in the same bitter tone. "I am sure she has made a new will in Rhoda's favor. That money ought to be yours."

"But why? Rhoda is her niece too; and she did leave it to me until I teased her so unkindly. Rhoda has known how to be truthful to her and yet win her love. I shall be very glad if Rhoda has the money!"

"You are a child, a silly child! You know nothing of the value of money! Molly, I wanted you to live here

when your father and I are gone; but it is Rhoda who will be mistress here!"

"And what a charming mistress of Dering she will make! You will like it when you are used to the idea, mother, and you would rather I was happy than rich. You want your little Molly to be happy?"

"You do not understand, Molly," was Mrs. Dering's impatient answer. She got up, stumbling over the dog, who had curled himself up in a corner of Molly's gown.

"That dog's right place is in the stables!" she said sharply.

"My Bill in the stables, mother?" cried Molly, with a look of mock distress. "Then I must live in the stables, too; I cannot be parted from him!"

Mrs. Dering could not resist smiling; but the smile instantly gave way to a heavy frown.

"Rhoda will be with her aunt all day, I suppose?"

"Adrian is coming down this afternoon."

"He is sure to spend most of the time in Millicent's room. We are outsiders, now, Molly."

"Well, I am glad to be an outsider, so far as Millicent's room is concerned," said Molly, with a little laugh. "Even Rhoda cannot convert her to the extent of having fresh air in her room. Poor Aunt Millicent! Do you think she is really very ill, mother?"

"I am afraid so. The doctors speak very seriously about her heart. There will be no time for—"

Mrs. Dering stopped. She was going to say, "No time for this infatuation for Rhoda to wear out;" but she could not go on with Molly's innocent eyes upon her.

"I must go and write my letters," she said, shortly.

Rhoda found her aunt lying on the couch. She was looking very ill now, and her breathing was short and painful. After a little conversation, Miss Dering took up a letter.

"I have heard from Adrian this morning, Rhoda."

"Yes?"

"You know he is coming to-day to stay for a few hours?"

"Molly told me so this morning," said Rhoda, without looking at her aunt.

"He is coming to speak to you again, Rhoda," Mrs. Dering went on. "He would not take your answer last week. You promised me to reconsider that answer. He writes to me to-day to say that he must know his fate now that you have had time enough for consideration, and that he has a right to a final answer."

"That is quite true," said Rhoda, in a low tone. "I wanted to give him a final answer last week."

"But we were too wise to allow you, Rhoda, I do not understand you. Look at me, child!"

Rhoda turned her eyes upon her aunt and met the eager glance of Miss Dering's haggard dark eyes; then her own eyes drooped. Her aunt laid her hand upon her arm.

"Rhoda, you love him! Ah, do not tell me that you do not, for I have read the truth in your eyes!"

"Aunt, I cannot marry him!" faltered Rhoda.

"Why?"

"Do not ask me why. I cannot marry him!"

Miss Dering looked steadily at her niece for some moments.

"Rhoda, I think I know the reason."

"Ah, no, aunt!"

"Yes, I think I know. You think of your father, and you are unwilling that Adrian should have to be ashamed of your father. But Adrian and I have talked of this."

"You have talked of my father?"

"Yes, that was inevitable. Adrian was very explicit about it. He said that, if you had lived with your father, it would have been different. In that case his duty might have been to put you out of his heart; but you and your father are entirely separated. He will be kind and generous to your father, Rhoda. Adrian is just in all things."

"He is very hard to sinners," said Rhoda, faintly.

"Yes—Adrian is hard in some ways, but he is very just."

Rhoda rose from her seat and walked to the window. Her aunt's eyes followed her.

"Rhoda, listen to me," she said, steadily. "I have left all my money to you."

Rhoda started and turned round; her aunt raised her hand.

"Do not speak; listen to me. It is easy to destroy a will. You must accept Adrian to-day, or I shall destroy that will. I shall make a new one and leave all my money to Mrs. Dering!"

"You are trying to bribe me!" cried Rhoda, her face flushing and growing deathly pale. She left the window and stood opposite to her aunt.

"I am trying to make you choose your own happiness. I don't pretend to understand you, Rhoda; but I will not let you cast away your life's best chance."

Rhoda stood silent. There was a

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terrible struggle in her heart. Suddenly she sank down at her aunt's feet and took her hands in hers.

"Aunt Millicent, let me tell you—"

But she stopped. The peculiar paleness which accompanied the heart attacks, which were growing more frequent daily, came over Miss Dering's face.

"Call Stanton!" Miss Dering said hoarsely.

Rhoda hastily called the maid, and together they administered the remedies the doctor had ordered. Slowly the color came back into Miss Dering's face. The danger was over for the time. Stanton went away, and Rhoda sat down and put her hand into her aunt's.

"You will do what I want?" Miss Dering whispered, holding the girl's hand fast. "You will be good to me, Rhoda, and let me die happy in the thought of your future."

Rhoda bent and kissed her.

"I will give Adrian my answer this afternoon," she said, softly.

"Tell me now what your answer will be."

"Dear aunt, let me wait till this afternoon. I cannot tell you now."

And with this Miss Dering was forced to be content.

Adrian was not coming until late in the afternoon. After luncheon, Miss Dering sent Rhoda for a walk. When the girl came downstairs, she found Mrs. Dering in the hall.

"Where is Molly, Aunt Agnes?" she said, pleasantly.

"Out with her father," was Mrs. Dering's short answer.

Rhoda crossed the hall to the door, but her aunt called her back.

"Come here, Rhoda; I want to speak to you."

Mrs. Dering was sitting in one of the great carved oak chairs that stood by the marble hearth. Rhoda came and leaned against the carved mantelpiece. She was looking very pale and grave, and there were indications of recently shed tears. Mrs. Dering looked at her with a hard cold glance.

"Look round this hall, Rhoda, and tell me how it strikes you."

Rhoda glanced round the stately hall. The paneled walls were covered with old armor, and there were

one or two of the finest portraits there. In the glorious arched roof were stained glass windows, and the colored light fell upon the marble floor and illumined the beautiful tapestry hanging before the doors and the oak cabinets filled with costly china.

"It is very beautiful," Rhoda said gravely.

"The Derings have held this house for more than five centuries," said Mrs. Dering, in a cold tone. "The annals of our race are filled with noble deeds of noble men and women. Do you think that you are worthy to be mistress here?"

Rhoda's dark face flushed at the cruel words.

"Do you mean to insult me, Aunt Agnes?"

"I mean to tell you the truth. Since you have entered these doors, you have been spoiled by adulation and flattery; but I will speak the truth to you."

"Go on," said Rhoda. She clenched her hands, and her very lips grew pale with the effort to be calm.

"Your father is a disgrace to his name," said Mrs. Dering, in slow measured tones. "You were educated by charity in the convent. You were asked here out of pity because your uncle did not wish you to live with your father or to become a governess. And how have you rewarded his kindness? You have schemed to get your aunt's fortune. You have schemed to get Adrian's love. You think you are successful in both, but be not too sure. Your aunt is still living and Adrian has not proposed to you yet."

Mrs. Dering stopped. The pale set look on Rhoda's face checked her violent words.

"Have you finished?" said Rhoda slowly.

"Yes—I have finished. Think over what I have said. Ask yourself if you are fit mistress for Dering before you try any more to win that position."

"Then listen to me for one moment, Aunt Agnes. I have not schemed; Aunt Millicent's love was freely given to me. But you are wrong in one point. Adrian asked

me to be his wife last week."

"And you refused him? I do not believe it."

"He will ask me again to-day," said Rhoda, with a passionate thrill in her voice. "To-day I shall accept him."

Mrs. Dering rose and was about to speak, when Molly's voice sounded without; she was making some laughing remark to her father. The next moment they entered.

"Oh, you foolish, foolish people!" cried Molly. "It is so lovely out-of-doors! Go out at once, Rhoda; I will go with you."

"No, dear, no!" said Rhoda hurriedly. She hastily passed Molly and went out into the afternoon sunshine.

"What is the matter with Rhoda?" said Molly wonderingly. "I am afraid aunt Millicent must be worse."

Mrs. Dering made some slight remark and left the hall. Molly turned to her father and raised her pretty eyebrows.

"Quarreling, dad?"

"I am afraid so," he said, shaking his head.

Molly danced up to him and put her arms within his.

"Mother will become resigned to it when Jack comes home; Jack always makes her see things in the right light. And it is all so very lucky; I should not like Adrian to marry out of the family."

"You little puss, why didn't you fall in love with him and please your mother?"

"Because Adrian didn't fall in love with me," returned Molly promptly. "If he had, there would have been no chance for any one else."

"No for Jack?" said her father teasingly.

Molly shook her head.

"Not even for Jack! Adrian you see, would have insisted on my marrying him, and I should have had to do it! How thankful we all ought to be!"

(To Be Continued.)